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B-1B Plan Crucial to Halt Soviet Threat, AF Chief Says

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The Soviet threat is real — and the Reagan administration's plan to build a fleet of 100 B-1B bombers is crucial.

Those were the messages Secretary of the Air Force Verne Orr brought to Wichita Thursday when he spoke at a Paul Revere Foundation luncheon at the Wichita Royale. Orr was in Wichita to visit McConnell Air Force Base as part of a tour of Air Force bases throughout the country.

He assailed critics who want more — but cheaper — military hardware. "What they basically are saying is that we can afford the loss of the pilots more than their planes.

"Our administration did not come to Washington to sacrifice our most important asset — the lives of our personnel — on the altar of incompetent airplanes," Orr said.

He said the B-1B bomber, given its name to distinguish it from the B-1 model scrapped by President Jimmy Carter, will be vastly improved. It will have advanced Stealth and avionic technologies, take off faster than the B-52, be able to land on shorter runways and carry heavier loads, he said.

"And when it can't penetrate the USSR, it can be used as a Cruise missile carrier like the B-52 is now."

In an earlier news conference, Orr was asked about reports that the CIA had told the House appropriations subcommittee on defense that the B-52 would do about as well as the B-1B in penetrating the Soviet Union with Cruise missiles. "I think there's a little misconception," he said.

A Cruise missile, he said, is fired from hundreds of miles away from the USSR. The old B-1, he said, had a radar cross-section "only a fraction of the B-52," and the new B-1B will have a radar cross-section only a fraction of the old B-1. "So it has a much lower Stealth . . . It's an excellent penetrator long after the B-52 would be a penetrator."

Orr warned of the growing "Soviet threat." He noted that the USSR built 1,300 fighters and bombers in a year, while the US and NATO countries combined had built "only about 500."

"You've heard the saying: When we build they build, and when we stop they don't."

He also said:

- The MX missile is a vital part of America's defense needs. Putting land-placed ICBMs in Titan or Minuteman sites is only temporary. The administration is considering three permanent measures — continuous airborne alert, deep underground basing, and work on ballistic missile defense.

- The volunteer army is succeeding because of pay hikes. It's attracting more educated recruits. This year 88 percent of the Air Force's recruits had high school diplomas. Next year's goal is 92 percent. This year 70 percent of the Army's recruits had high school diplomas, compared to 50 percent last year.